

University of Dundee

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Smith, Dominic

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## Disastrous Communication: Walter Benjamin's 'The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay'

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(Dominic Smith; University of Dundee; [d.j.y.smith@dundee.ac.uk](mailto:d.j.y.smith@dundee.ac.uk))

**February 1932, Berlin, Germany:** Walter Benjamin live broadcasts a twenty-minute radio piece called 'The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay' (*Die Eisenbahnkatastrophe vom Firth of Tay*). The intended audience is schoolchildren, and no audio recording is made. It is assembled from materials Benjamin wrote at least as far back as 1929.

**March 1932, Frankfurt am Main, Germany:** Benjamin repeats the broadcast. The intended audience is schoolchildren. No audio recording is made.<sup>1</sup>

**May 2018, Dundee, Scotland:** A group of 8–13 year olds meet for a two-hour comics and visual communication workshop. They know all about a famous railway disaster that befell a bridge across the Firth of Tay in 1879. They are unaware, however, of an obscure 1932 radio piece called *Die Eisenbahnkatastrophe vom Firth of Tay*, the translated text of which will form the stimulus for their workshop. The site of the disaster described in Benjamin's broadcast is two miles south west of them.

Picture Benjamin sitting alone in his radio booth in 1932. It is tempting to view 'The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay' as *disastrous communication*: as something symptomatic of a career Benjamin felt was going astray, or as part of a broader set of radio pieces he wrote around this time that take disasters as their theme and that have come, in retrospect, to be viewed as allegories of the rise of European fascism (BBC 2014). Viewing things the first way only requires taking Benjamin at his word. Benjamin consistently [p 198] stated that he did radio work in the 1920s and 30s to make ends meet, and that he saw 'no interest' in it for serious scholars (Rosenthal 2014: xvii – xxii; Eiland and Jennings 2014: 332). Viewing things the second way only requires being aware of one of the most canonical images of Benjamin to have emerged since his suicide in 1940: that of the 'saturnine' thinker of the 'Angelus Novus', prophetically but powerlessly attuned to history's catastrophes – '[w]here we perceive a chain of events', as Benjamin wrote of the angel, 'he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet' (Benjamin 1999: 249; Sontag 1978).

It is justifiable to view 'Railway Disaster' in either of these ways, and both hit on aspects of Benjamin's life and work that we should communicate about. As this essay will seek to show, however, there are other ways in which 'Railway Disaster' can count as 'disastrous communication'. Instead of taking Benjamin at his word, developing a sense of these will involve breaking with his own views on the worth of his radio work. Likewise, instead of situating 'Railway Disaster' in terms of Benjamin's broader canon, it will involve submitting it to a very different context.

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<sup>1</sup> No known audio recordings of Benjamin's voice exist. A fragment of one of the eighty to ninety radio broadcasts he wrote between 1927 and 1933 is preserved ('Much Ado About Kasper'), but his voice does not appear (Rosenthal 2014: xiii).

Stop picturing Benjamin alone in his radio booth. Picture the Dundee afterschool group. Picture this group engaging animatedly with cut-up extracts from the text of Benjamin's broadcast, then quickly retranslating them into all kinds of drawn, written, and spoken formats: from comic strips and computer animations to two-minute lectures on the merits of viewing train engines anthropomorphically. Picture a group uninhibited by foreknowledge of Benjamin, but energised by his words. Picture some loosely interpreting the text. Picture others scrutinising it meticulously. Picture some not interacting with it at all. Picture some working intensely as individuals. Picture others starting off in teams with no plan, then improvising shared solutions to give coherence at the last moment. Picture Benjamin's words emerging, not as gloomy or fated, but in other ways, including playful and hopeful ones.

The aim of this essay is to chart a series of miscommunications and transformations occurring *to and through* Walter Benjamin's 'The Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay', between and beyond the three events listed at the beginning. Part one gives a sense of context by highlighting some contingencies that led to 'Railway Disaster' becoming a focus for the workshop. Part two describes the workshop itself. I show how its structure adapted to contingencies on the day, and give a sense of some of the rich materials produced. Part three concludes by situating both 'Railway Disaster' and the workshop as continuous with an approach to philosophising *with and through* technologies pursued in my 2018 book *Exceptional Technologies*. [p 199].

### 1.) 'What Technology Is'

'When, at the beginning of the last century, iron foundries began their first trials with the steam engine, it was something altogether different than when modern technicians and scientists work on a new airplane, a space rocket ..., or some other such machine. *Today we know what technology is*' (Benjamin 2014: 170, my emphasis).

These are the opening words of 'Railway Disaster'. In 1933, the year after they were broadcast, Benjamin gave up radio work and moved to Paris. In 1940, he was forced to flee Paris in the face of Nazi persecution, and the typescript for 'Railway Disaster' was included in papers left behind. These mistakenly made their way into the archives of the *Pariser Tageszeitung* ('Paris Daily News') newspaper, and, after the Second World War, were transferred between various Soviet and East German (GDR) archives (Rosenthal 2014: xvi). 'Railway Disaster' was first published in German in 1985, in a collection called *Aufklärung für Kinder (Enlightenment for Children)*, with other pieces Benjamin had written and performed for radio.<sup>2</sup> In 1989, the piece appeared in vol. 7 of Benjamin's *Gesammelte Schriften (Complete Works)*. It first appeared in English in 1999, in vol. 2 of Benjamin's *Selected Writings*. A new translation appeared in Verso's *Radio Benjamin* collection in 2014, with 28 other such 'Youth Hour' pieces.

Let me begin by noting three reasons why this piece, carried by these contingencies, struck me.

Consider Benjamin's assertion: 'today we know what technology is'. The point, it seems, is that whereas previous ages merely played and experimented with technology, modernity has, since the industrial revolution, aimed at controlling and rationalising it. This point is so general as to appear symptomatic of what many philosophers of technology today call 'classical' philosophy of technology. Thinkers commonly labelled 'classical' include Hannah Arendt, Herbert Marcuse, Hans Jonas, Karl Jaspers, and,

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<sup>2</sup> This was turned into an audio book in 2003 (Benjamin 2003).

above all, Martin Heidegger (Achterhuis 2001: 3; Verbeek 2005: 7; Brey 2016: 129). The implication is usually negative. It holds that these figures were doing something dated and insufficiently empirical: instead of focusing on the complexities of actual technologies in concrete situations of design and use, 'classical' philosophers of technology were, it seems, tending towards an abstract conception of 'Technology' (with a capital 'T'), viewed as some kind of mysterious transcendental force (see Smith 2018).

It would be easy to describe Benjamin as a 'classical' philosopher of technology. This is compounded by strong connections with the schools of both phenomenology and critical theory to which a great many other [p 200] putatively 'classical' thinkers belonged.<sup>3</sup> But his assertion suggests something very different on closer inspection.

Benjamin's assertion is comfortably among the more hyperbolic statements he ever made on technology.<sup>4</sup> But this does not mean it is imprecisely weighed. Rather, when situated in terms of its immediate rhetorical context, it makes perfect sense as a way into a case study that, far from being 'unempirical', is *hyper-empirical*. By this, I mean that Benjamin's work on the Tay Bridge Disaster is packed with the kind of allusive historical, technical, poetic and philosophical details that work to productively challenge our received sense of what constitutes a 'technology' (see Smith 2018). Instead of identifying Benjamin as 'classical', his opening assertion is merely the first of these details: less a last word on how his work should be judged, more an overture to an open-ended conversation. A key aim for this essay will therefore be to impart a sense of just some of the other details covered in 'Railway Disaster', to take this conversation further.

Second, I live and work in Dundee, the main city on the Firth of Tay. This may seem like a very parochial thing to note. The site of the disaster described in Benjamin's broadcast is nevertheless inescapable for me: living and working in Dundee, I see it virtually every day. Of itself, this is too trivial a point to have much philosophical significance. When we consider that Benjamin is one of the most influential thinkers of 'place' to have emerged from the European philosophical tradition, however, different potentials emerge.

Benjamin wrote justly celebrated pieces on places including Naples, Moscow, Marseilles, Berlin and Paris. In contrast to these places, where Benjamin either lived or visited, he did not visit the British Isles, never mind Dundee or the Firth of Tay. Whenever I look at the still visible stumps of the first Tay Rail Bridge, then, adjacent to the supports of its still functioning replacement, I am, on reflection, in a very curious position indeed: that of actually witnessing a site that remained merely imagined for Benjamin. A key aim of this essay will be to make good on this, not as a quirk of personal history, but as a philosophical opportunity: to show how the approach to place evident across Benjamin's work, celebrated though it is, might in fact be more dynamic and nuanced than a focus on some of the more famous and well-trodden sites of his work might lead us to suppose.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> For Benjamin's connections with phenomenology see Fenves 2011. For his connections with critical theory, see Jay 1973 and Buck-Morss 1977 and 1991.

<sup>4</sup> In comparison, for instance, with famous remarks made in 'Konvolut N' of *The Arcades Project* (Benjamin 2002: 456–488).

<sup>5</sup> The toy shops of Berlin or the Arcades of Paris, for instance (Benjamin 2006, 2002). A possible avenue of interpretation here would note that I appear to have stumbled into a position analogous to that of Kafka's character, Karl Roßmann. Kafka, one of Benjamin's heroes, never visited the United States, but wrote about

Third, why was ‘Railway Disaster’ addressed to children, through radio? The simple answer is that there was no choice. Benjamin undertook his radio work for money and professed to see no scholarly merit in it. But this underestimates the virtues he made of his constraints. Principal among these were the novelty of his medium and the difficulty of trying to make philosophical ideas accessible. As I hope to show, Benjamin [p 201] made virtues of these by engaging radio’s democratising potentials and by introducing inventive range and nuance into both the form and content of his broadcasts.

What ‘Railway Disaster’ ultimately points towards in this respect, I think, is an open and hospitable philosophy of education that is implicit throughout Benjamin’s work from beginning to end. This approach draws on the philosophies of technology and place I have mentioned in this part, and stands in dynamic contrast to a proprietorial model of education prevalent today. It does this through exceptional examples, and by using gentle forms of what Sam Weber has called ‘methodological extremism’ to unsettle received notions of age, expertise, and appropriate educative media (Weber 2008: 179).<sup>6</sup> As I will seek to demonstrate in the next part, it has immense potential to speak to us today.

## 2. ‘Localising Philosophy’

My aim for this part is to situate the workshop mentioned at the beginning of this essay as an instance of ‘localising philosophy’. By this, I don’t mean an attempt to render philosophy ‘provincial’ or ‘narrow-minded’. I mean an attempt to make philosophy *hit home*. That is, an attempt to challenge the categories of ‘home’ and ‘place’, and to render them philosophically perplexing. What was therefore at stake in the Dundee workshop, if you prefer, was a gentle attempt to render ‘*heim*’ (home) ‘*unheimlich*’ (uncanny) (see Freud 2003 and Fisher 2016).

There are obvious ways you might try to do this. If you’re in the philosophy department at the University of Edinburgh, you might think about the legacy of David Hume. If you’re at the University of Glasgow, you might think about Adam Smith. Dundee does not have such direct connections to the philosophical canon.<sup>7</sup> It does have something that might just be more philosophically interesting, however: a notorious railway bridge.<sup>8</sup>

More precisely, Dundee has two railway bridges: one that opened in May 1878 and that then collapsed with the loss of all aboard an Edinburgh to Dundee train in the Tay Bridge Disaster of December 1879 (an estimated 59–75 people); another that opened in 1887, and that still functions as part of the

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Roßmann’s experiences there in the novel *America* (or *The Missing Person*). Have I analogously become a figment of a place that remained merely imagined for a different heavyweight of modernist literature? Conducted badly, this would lead in the directions of ‘the canon’ and narcissism. If I mention this speculation here, then, it is less to indulge it, than to highlight that this essay aims to pursue a different interpretative possibility, for something much more participatory and collective (the workshop).

<sup>6</sup> I mean ‘exceptional’ here in the sense explored in Smith 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Dundee has connections to important figures in the history of philosophy, such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Norman Kemp Smith. These are more tenuous and indirect than the connections that Edinburgh and Glasgow have to Hume and Smith, however.

<sup>8</sup> This point is counterintuitive and intentionally tendentious. I say ‘more interesting’ because the bridge has the capacity to act as a focal point for philosophical reflection in ways that are novel, and that the *oeuvres* of thinkers like Hume and Smith don’t have on first sight, because different forms of familiarity, expertise, and imagination are at stake. The more reflective version of this point is this: a focus on famous philosophers need not exclude one on more marginal phenomena such as this bridge; indeed, the bridge can become a focal point for a wide-range of philosophies, including those of Hume and Smith.

national rail network (McKean 2006). The second bridge recycled parts of its predecessor. What Dundee therefore shares with the town of Wormit on the south side of the Tay is the ghost of a bridge running alongside a replacement fashioned, in part, from the skeleton of its predecessor. To put it this way is melodramatic. It is nevertheless arguably more precise than the straightforward proposition 'Dundee has a railway bridge'. [p 202]

There was something sufficiently interesting in this to inspire Walter Benjamin to turn the Tay Bridge Disaster into a focus for a radio piece for German schoolchildren. In May 2018, I, along with my University of Dundee colleagues Dr Anna Robb (Education) and Dr Damon Herd (Humanities) attempted to reciprocate. We did so in conjunction with one of the usual afterschool clubs at Dundee Comics Creative Space, a hub that uses comics and visual communication techniques to help children develop skills relevant to their education (Comics Creative Space 2019). The aim was to stage a two-hour workshop that would take up the translated text of Benjamin's broadcast and make it accessible to local schoolchildren. The children were aged 8–13.

We began with a discussion. We showed an image of the current Rail Bridge (fig.1) and asked 'what is this, and what can you tell us about it?' This elicited a show of hands from almost all present, and the first association to be pursued concerned not the still functioning bridge (left of picture) but the stumps of the failed one (right of picture). All the children had heard of the Tay Bridge Disaster, and most could relay interesting details.



(Fig 1. Ghost Bridge/Replacement Bridge Photograph by Own Fraser McLaughlin).

We then showed another image and asked 'are you familiar with this?' It was a photograph of a painting from 1948, by James McIntosh Patrick. The original hangs in McManus Galleries, Dundee's main art gallery. Most of the children had seen the image, either in the gallery, in books, or online. In thinking about which images to include for the event, we had selected this to act as a kind of metaphorical 'bridge': the aim was to switch [p 203] from something local and well-known (McIntosh Patrick's

painting) to an international perspective that would be relatively unknown (Benjamin's broadcast). Interestingly, the children used the McIntosh Patrick image as a way of spontaneously going beyond this. What the group was most interested in were visible signs of an earlier historical time: the horse and cart in the foreground, for instance, and the steam from two engines in the background (one on the Dundee/Glasgow line, the other on the bridge itself, on the Dundee/Edinburgh line). Indeed, the group seemed to want to leave these open as signs of an indeterminate past: rather than wanting to date them as part of a realist painting produced some 69 years after the Disaster, it was as if they wanted the signs to bring them into closer proximity with the past *as such*.

We then introduced Benjamin, showing a standard photographic portrait widely available online, followed by a famous cartoon from the *New York Review of Books*. The aim of the latter was to appeal to their sensibilities as a group of artists.

We concluded with a brief overview of the text of 'Railway Disaster'. Before the event, we had decided to divide the text into seven key episodes, and we imparted a sense of these by showing a slide with seven headings, which remained up for the rest of the workshop:

1. 'Technology's scary history....'
2. 'A goblin in space!' [p 204]
3. 'Why are railways important?'
4. 'Building the Tay Bridge'.
5. 'Disaster!'
6. 'The aftermath'.
7. 'The Eiffel Tower'.<sup>9</sup>

We had made photocopies of Benjamin's text beforehand, and had cut it up to reflect these episodes. The discussion concluded with us asking the children to choose an episode (or episodes), and to draw images responding to the extract. The children were reassured that they had broad scope: they could work alone or in teams; they could focus on anything ranging from a particular image or character to all the episodes; they could update the story; they could stop if they felt uncomfortable or bored; and they had 1 hour before we would reconvene.

One artist built a story around a character she had developed in other sessions, and which she had used in other comics. The character turned out to be a historically unacknowledged survivor of the disaster, and constituted (along with her dog) a response to Benjamin's observation that there were 'no eyewitnesses' (Benjamin 2014: 174).<sup>10</sup> Another artist read all the episodes and retold the story starting from the second (the perspective of the Goblin in space). Another artist decided to update Benjamin's approach in the first episode, focusing on what she found most puzzling about technology today. She produced a scene in which the key character was Amazon's *Alexa*. Another artist chose to take the kind of license and characterisation involved here further, telling the story from the perspective of an unacknowledged villain who had caused the disaster. Another group of artists told the story from the perspective of the train engine itself. In this, they were following a notorious local precedent: the engine

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<sup>9</sup> See Benjamin 2014.

<sup>10</sup> Benjamin may have meant that there were no direct eyewitnesses (survivors). A number of eyewitness reports were cited by the official inquiry (McKean 2006).

involved in the disaster was fished from the Tay shortly after, refitted, and went on to serve on British railways until the 1920s. It was nicknamed 'The Diver' (McKean 2006: 195).<sup>11</sup>

The group reconvened after one hour, and the children who felt comfortable to do so were invited to 'show and tell' their work. What was immediately striking was that children who had seemed uninterested had in fact quietly gone about producing responses, and were capable of eloquently speaking to them. What was striking across the board was the quality of responses produced, both visually, and in terms of the capacity of the children to articulate what was at stake in them. We had allotted merely one hour for reading the extracts and drawing responses, and had worried that this wouldn't be enough time; the children's images and observations quickly allayed this. [p 205]

Coming from a background in academic philosophy, what struck me was the number of core philosophical issues touched upon. Through quickly-created comic strips, this group had explored questions relating to ontology (*how many bridges cross the River Tay at Dundee?*), epistemology (*how can an event without survivors be made known, and what counts as 'eyewitnessing'?*), ethics (*how should cultural memory be represented, and to whom does it belong?*), and aesthetics (*how are character, agency and the perspective of a narrator to be factored into a story – should they be assigned to an extra-terrestrial observer, unacknowledged survivors or culprits, or technologies themselves?*)

One obvious flaw with our initial approach is that we didn't take enough account of differences in the children's reading abilities. The core problem here was that we had perhaps mistakenly privileged fidelity to the text of Benjamin's broadcast. Instead of trying to use all the text, perhaps we should have used shorter snippets, then provided context when asked, driven more by the stories the children wanted to tell. This is something we have tried to address in subsequent workshops involving the materials.<sup>12</sup>

But isn't there a more serious flaw? At the beginning of this part, I situated Benjamin's broadcast in terms of a broader attempt to 'localise philosophy' and sought to head off suspicions that this commits us to forms of provincialism or narrow-mindedness. I now want to suggest that what this afterschool group did in response to Benjamin's text constitutes refutation of these suspicions. But isn't the more serious flaw that this text is simply too terse and evanescent? It comes in at a mere six pages, and is capable of being spoken in twenty minutes. Isn't it the kind of stimulus that quickly exhausts itself? And isn't this the real reason a group of 8-13 year olds could productively interact with it in an hour?

My aim for the next part is to refute these suspicions. To do so, I will situate both the text and the workshop in terms of broader issues explored in Benjamin's work, and in terms of issues that might be explored in the field of philosophy of technology today.

### **3. Exceptional Technologies**

Although Benjamin gave up radio work in 1933, he did write a short piece on his radio career in 1934, called 'On the Minute' (*Auf die Minute*). Let me cite the opening passage at length:

After trying for months, I had received a commission from the head of broadcasting in D. to entertain listeners for twenty minutes.... I was [p 206] told that if my banter fell on sympathetic

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<sup>11</sup> Ethical approval was obtained from children and parents in all instances described.

<sup>12</sup> For instance: the 'Materialist Pedagogies' workshop at the University of Dundee, May 17-18<sup>th</sup> 2019.



ears, I could look forward to doing such reports on a more regular basis. The program director was nice enough to point out to me that what was decisive, besides the structure of my observations, was the manner and style of the lecture. ‘Beginners’, he said, ‘make the mistake of thinking they’re giving a lecture in front of a larger or smaller audience which just happens to be invisible. Nothing could be further from the truth. The radio listener is almost always a solitary individual; and even if you were to reach a few thousand of them, you are always only reaching thousands of solitary individuals. So you need to behave as if you were speaking to a solitary individual – or to many solitary individuals, if you like, but in no case to a large gathering of people. That’s one thing. Then there is another: you must hold yourself strictly to the time limit. If you don’t, we will have to do it for you, and we’ll do so by just brutally cutting you off. Experience has taught us that going over the allotted time, even slightly, tends to multiply the delays over the course of the program. If we don’t intervene at that very moment, our entire program unravels. – *So don’t forget: adopt a relaxed style of speaking and conclude on the minute!*’ (Benjamin 2008: 407, my emphasis).

At the beginning of this essay, we pictured Benjamin alone in his radio booth. We are now encountering Benjamin’s own reflections from within just such a situation. They close an important loop: from the vantage point of what turned out to be the last piece dedicated to radio published during his lifetime (Ryder 2016: 217), we find Benjamin reflecting back on constraints laid down to him at the beginning of his work in the medium.

But another set of issues opens up: the fact that ‘On the Minute’ turned out to be Benjamin’s last piece on radio is a matter of contingency that could be added to those I listed at the beginning of part one (something that could have happened otherwise but that did not; another disaster of communication affecting a voice cut short). Consider, in contrast, the tone in which the constraints of the medium were initially laid down to him: it is one of quasi-Kantian *moral necessity* (see Kant 2002), dictated by a producer who remains anonymous in Benjamin’s account and who thereby stands in for a universalising voice prescribing how all must act in similar circumstances (the voice of the ‘one’, in a Kierkegaardian or Heideggerian sense (Kierkegaard 1978: 62; Heidegger 2005: 163-168)): ‘you *need to* behave as if you were speaking to a solitary individual’; ‘you *must* hold yourself strictly to the time limit’ (my emphasis).

At the beginning of this essay, I listed three events: 1.) a broadcast from Berlin; 2.) a broadcast from Frankfurt; 3.) an educational workshop [p 207] in Dundee. How does the tension between contingency and necessity just highlighted relate to these? What is immediately striking is that the producer’s words apply strictly to the first two. Like the broadcast described in ‘On the Minute’, both these events involved performances of ‘*Die Eisenbahnkatastrophe*’ that were live, unrecorded, and scheduled to last twenty minutes. Adding the Dundee workshop to the mix drastically changes things, however.

In part one, I attempted to give a sense of some contingencies that allowed ‘Railway Disaster’ to become a focus for the workshop. In part two, I attempted to give a sense of how successful the workshop was. Absent all concerns about how it got there and how successful it was, however, Benjamin’s reflections in ‘On the Minute’ allow something else to hit home: simply taking the text of ‘*Die Eisenbahnkatastrophe*’ as a stimulus for the workshop *at all* exposes the contingency of *both* the imperatives prescribed by the radio producer. First, by making this piece the focus of something collective and participatory, it shows is that, when engaging with such material, ‘you *don’t* need to behave as if you were speaking to a solitary individual’. Second, by putting a text from 1932 in touch

with a group from 2018, it calls into question the sense in which one has to ‘hold [oneself] strictly to the time limit’.

Added together, the three events listed at the beginning of this essay amount to scarcely two hours and forty minutes in duration, not accounting for redundancies, silences and repetitions (assume, for instance, that the Berlin and Frankfurt broadcasts were verbatim copies). The Dundee workshop was separated from the radio broadcasts by over eighty-six years, considerable differences of language, media ecology, and technological and cultural conditions, plus a World War that positioned their respective host countries as adversaries. It would, moreover, be a considerable stretch (and conceit) to say that any of these three events were experienced as ‘key events’ in the lives of those involved: Benjamin’s broadcast was recycled from material written as far back as 1929, and he professed that he was only doing his radio work for subsistence; the Dundee workshop was a one-off session that slotted into the established programme of a comics group, and, if anything, had the capacity to show up as an annoying distraction for the children because of this – as a way of taking away from the continuity of their regular sessions.

I nevertheless want to conclude this essay with a reflection on how these three events might be connected with bigger pictures.

The problem facing us at the end of part two above was to try to connect the local up to broader philosophical issues. Let me go the other way here: following a description of three relatively specialised claims made in my [p 208] 2018 book *Exceptional Technologies*, I will attempt to show how these relate to the three events listed at the beginning of this essay.

*Exceptional Technologies* makes three main claims. First, it argues for a renewed sense of the transcendental. ‘Transcendental’ is a loaded term in the history of philosophy, where it is most famously associated with Kant’s ‘transcendental idealism’, as developed in the *Critique of Pure Reason*. In contemporary contexts, including philosophy of technology, the term is sometimes used, confusingly, as a synonym for ‘transcendent’ or ‘out of this world’. *Exceptional Technologies* argues for a sense of the transcendental that is not reducible to either of these senses. Instead, it argues for a metaphilosophical sense of how this theme has developed since Kant. Transcendental philosophy, in this sense, is not reducible to ‘transcendental idealism’. Instead, it is philosophy that addresses the following question in different ways: ‘given X, what are the conditions for the possibility of X?’ On this account, approaches ranging from those of Kant, Hegel and Marx, through to the more contemporary approaches of thinkers such as Foucault, Deleuze and Malabou can be characterised as ‘transcendental’, and are to be distinguished by how they problematise key terms at work in this question differently (‘given’, ‘X’ – that is, ‘objecthood’–, ‘conditions’, ‘possibility’).<sup>13</sup> Instead of reifying the ‘Transcendental’ into something sublime that takes us out of this world, then, *Exceptional Technologies* argues that the transcendental should be *trivialised* as a relatively common theme in the history of philosophy.

Second, *Exceptional Technologies* argues that philosophy of technology, especially since a putative ‘empirical turn’ in the 1990s/early 2000s, has tended to rely on a relatively unclarified common sense of what constitutes a ‘technology’. This follows, I argue, from the fact that ‘transcendental’ has, since the empirical turn, generally been used as a pejorative term for the kinds of ‘classical’ philosophers of

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<sup>13</sup> The conditions involved in the sense of the transcendental I am arguing for are not reducible to causal conditions, or ‘ideal’ ones.

technology mentioned in part one of this essay. The typical claim made against such thinkers is that they focused on a reified sense of 'Technology' (with a capital T), and that they avoided empirical engagements with 'technologies themselves' (Achterhuis 2001, Verbeek 2005). While there is merit to this claim in particular cases, *Exceptional Technologies* argues that it is problematic in two main respects: first, it tends to repeat the gesture it condemns by reifying the 'Transcendental' itself into something sublime and otherworldly; second, it esteems a sense of 'technologies themselves' that tends towards positivism and presentism, as if our sense of what constitutes 'a technology' should just be obvious. A way to address these issues, I claim, is to de-reify the transcendental, and to view it adjectivally, as a method, process or operation of sense. Understood in this way, I [p 209] argue, a sense of the transcendental opens up the possibility of critical reflection on the conditions that constitute our sense of 'technology' in fine-grained ways across different situations. In the book, this leads to the claim that, rather than focusing simply on case studies that align with our common sense of what technologies are (a smartphone, the Internet, AI, or nanotechnology, for instance), we can learn just as much (and sometimes much more) from case studies of 'exceptional technologies' that show up as paradoxical (for instance: merely imagined, failed, or impossible technologies (see Smith 2018)).

Third, *Exceptional Technologies* argues that philosophy of technology might usefully experiment with different pictures of method, to open it up as an exciting field capable of sustaining many different perspectives. The point, trivial though it may seem, is that the language of 'turning' employed in this field has nontrivial consequences for how we picture developments in it. Where 'turning' is our key register, I argue, we are committed to a picture of method that is implicitly first-person and oppositional, where every 'turn towards' involves increasingly specialised 'turns away from'. I suggest an alternative picture of method as 'mapping' in the book, but mostly as a way of emphasising a broader point: that other pictures of method are possible and desirable, and that they might help us open philosophy of technology up as a multidimensional 'problem space'.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The most obvious direction of travel issuing from *Exceptional Technologies'* three claims would be a 'transcendental turn' in philosophy of technology. I object to this, however, on the same grounds that I object to the notion of an empirical turn: both are crudely first-person and oppositional pictures of method. I also think this forsakes something more interesting: opening philosophy of technology up as a field capable of being explored in all sorts of directions at once, whether, for instance, 'empirical' or 'transcendental', 'complex' or 'simple', 'continental' or 'analytic', 'local' or 'global'.

A more restricted version of such a turn might involve renewed focus on the classical 'transcendentalists' that the empirical turn turned away from, such as Marcuse, Ellul, Anders, Mumford, Jaspers, Arendt, Fromm, or Heidegger. I think this has some potential, but, to put it crudely, that it might remain too comfortably within the confines of exegetical convention.

A more inventive version of the restricted move might involve identifying new 'transcendentalists' who focus critically on conditions implicated in technologies in interesting ways. Some candidates might include Wittgenstein, McLuhan, Kittler, Derrida, Haraway, Deleuze, Simondon or Hui. I have witnessed versions of this move performed extremely well (for instance, by Mark Coeckelbergh in relation to Wittgenstein (2017)), but think it too might suffer from a tendency towards exegetical convention in the long run.

A further move might involve viewing 'exceptional technologies' as a special set of resources to be leveraged and applied in industry. What I have in mind here is something like the use of 'design fictions' in product design (see, for instance, Sterling 2005). In raising this point, I am not presuming that exceptional technologies have any ground-breaking potential in this respect. Instead, I'm expressing discomfort at how they might be framed by a 'research and development' ideology dominant in contemporary Universities.

In part two of this essay, I described Benjamin's 'Railway Disaster at the Firth of Tay' as an instance of 'localising philosophy'. Viewed in this way, 'Railway Disaster' connects to a number of dimensions of philosophy of technology's contemporary problem space that are, I think, underexplored as we try to face up to educational and existential issues posed by technologies for future generations in ways that are inclusive and democratic (for instance: the local/global dichotomy; the place of philosophical and technological education in contemporary school curricula; asymmetries of access, information and knowledge; and issues concerning what constitutes responsible and sustainable design, and who gets to be part of the design process).

The first thing I would like to note here is that Benjamin's broadcast, short though it was, immediately connects up with the three main claims of *Exceptional Technologies*. First, Benjamin is one of the key thinkers in the post-Kantian tradition in European philosophy: from beginning to end, his work bears witness to a profound sense of the transcendental that is focused on a wide-ranging interrogation of conditions of possibility.<sup>15</sup> Second, 'Railway Disaster' takes what can be characterised as a clear and powerful 'exceptional technology' (a failed and ghostly bridge) and uses it to provoke reflection on 'what technology is'. Third, Benjamin's broadcast packs in clear [p 210] examples of methodological experimentation: in the second episode listed in part two above, for instance, he cites the description of a space-travelling Goblin from Henri de Grandville's illustrated 1843 book *Un Autre monde*, and in episode seven he describes the Eiffel Tower.

On the face of it, Benjamin's Goblin is an example of him economically drawing on a text with which he was highly familiar. Viewed more closely, however, it emerges as a strategically-placed citation designed to provoke the imaginations of children, as well as a strong implicit assertion of Benjamin's own (high) estimation of illustrations and visual communication. Benjamin's description of the Eiffel Tower might similarly appear as something 'tagged on' on a superficial reading. Viewed in context, however, it emerges as a clear example of the Dada and Surrealist-inspired method of 'dialectical images' that he was experimenting with at the time. A 'dialectical image', as he famously put it in a note for the 'Arcades Project', involves a 'constellation saturated with tensions', giving rise to 'the arrest of thoughts' (Benjamin 2002a: 475). On closer inspection, it is just such an image that is at stake in his description of the Eiffel Tower. The key point is that this description is in profound tension with the image of the Tay Bridge developed over the course of his broadcast, 'arresting' it: whereas economic purposes seemed to trump safety concerns in the case of the Tay Bridge, the Eiffel Tower initially seemed to have a purely aesthetic function, only finding an economic one following construction, as a radio tower (Benjamin 2014: 175).

We could go much further. At the beginning of this essay, for instance, I mentioned that 'Railway Disaster' was cribbed together from materials that Benjamin had written as far back as 1929. What I didn't mention is that these materials (including the Goblin episode) were among the first to be written towards the 'Arcades Project', and among the first that Benjamin aired to the famous 'Königstein' group that included Theodor Adorno, Gretel Karplus, and Max Horkheimer (see Benjamin 2002b). This group was, notoriously, where Adorno first encountered Benjamin's work in depth, and where he became excited by the plans for the 'Arcades Project' (Buck-Morss 1977: 22–23; 136–163).

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<sup>15</sup> On Kant's importance for Benjamin, see Benjamin 1996, Fenves 2011, and Eiland and Jennings 2014.

Without overstatement, then, we can say this: Benjamin's reflections on the Tay Bridge Disaster, unworthy of serious scholarship though he may have deemed them, nevertheless emerge as contributing factors to three famous events in twentieth century European philosophical culture. First, they draw on materials and methods involved in Benjamin's work towards the 'Arcades Project' (the Goblin episode and 'dialectical images'). Second, they were implicated in the beginning of the correspondence and friendship between Benjamin and Adorno that would last for the rest of Benjamin's life, and that would profoundly influence Adorno's work for the rest of his (see [p 211] Adorno 1990: 3–57; Jameson 1990: 49–58). Third, they were implicated in the beginning of 'critical theory' as a school of thought.

But doesn't situating 'Railway Disaster' like this stray too far towards the 'canon'? What if you are trying to make philosophy 'hit home' for somewhere that doesn't have pieces written about it by famous thinkers like Walter Benjamin? More seriously still, are the canon and famous thinker discussed here not decidedly Eurocentric and exclusive, not to mention dated?

In response to these issues, let me simply note, first, that everywhere that is somewhere has a history, and, second, that if it doesn't have such pieces and thinkers, then perhaps it harbours a greater opportunity: to either find or invent different comparable focal points, and to produce thinkers of its own.<sup>16</sup> These points are no doubt far too tritely and tersely expressed here. Worse still, they might come across as drastically underestimating ethical and political difficulties involved in telling stories and histories about particular places due to forms of oppression (past or present, systematic or unconscious), as well as gaps in the historical record. The point, quite simply, is that each of these points is desperately important, and deserves much greater attention than I can give it here.

Notwithstanding these limitations, there is one key point that I would like to make in conclusion, and that I take this essay to have demonstrated: insofar as any educational event has the degree of liberty required to take up a piece like 'Railway Disaster' as a stimulus, it also has the degree of liberty required to invent and reinvent such stimuli. This matters, I take it, independent of how long or short, successful or unsuccessful the event might be.

The overall contention of this essay, then, is this: the constellation formed by the three events listed at the beginning harbours immense philosophical potential. This is the case however fleeting and contingent these events were, and however far apart they appear in time and space. In the Dundee case, this constellation harbours a profound and transformative sense of 'disastrous communication' that can feature as part of a broader attempt to 'localise philosophy'. This approach may appear to risk parochialism, narrow-mindedness, and quickly exhausting itself. On a more profound level, however, it harbours potentials in favour of an open and democratic approach to philosophical education that resists these dangers, and that connects and problematizes the categories of the 'local' and the 'global' in meaningful ways (that *bridges* them, if you will allow).

In the case of the Dundee workshop, this bridging exercise turned out to be less a question of following the *letter* of a text by 'Walter Benjamin the canonical European philosopher', and more a question of enacting the *spirit* [p 212] of an approach to education that Benjamin's work pursues on a fundamental level, and that can be obscured by more 'canonical' images of him. In the process, we moved from a sense of 'Railway Disaster' as but a minor footnote in the career of an isolated philosopher tending

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<sup>16</sup> For an illuminating instance of such 'field philosophy', see Kabat 2017.

inexorably towards a gloomy outcome, towards an approach that tried to receive this piece and turn it into an educational site capable of cutting across all kinds of perceived divisions of history, media, age, expertise and cultural background. This happened independent of Benjamin's intentions for 'Railway Disaster', through the historical contingencies and translations involved in various linguistic, cultural and media platforms, as a happy instance of 'miscommunication'.

To put it melodramatically again (but once again with more than a grain of accuracy): it is as if we were shifting from the picture of a train falling into a foggy abyss where a bridge should be, as occurred one night in 1879 between Fife and Dundee. Instead, it is as if we were trying to turn the site of a disaster into one of *disastrous communication*. Further: it is as if we were trying to get inside of a particular type of carriage, where people of all kinds of different ages and backgrounds, while being transported, could be free to philosophically communicate (and miscommunicate) the things that matter to them, wherever they are from, and wherever they are going to.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Postscript: The Comics Creative Space workshop described in part two was so successful that we are running a series of follow-up workshops throughout 2019, culminating in a session at a 'Materialist Pedagogies' workshop in May 2019. I am currently writing a book manuscript that develops the three main points made in part one of this essay in depth (on Benjamin's philosophies of technology, place and education), and that tries to address the concerns outlined at the bottom of p 12 above in appropriate depth. For further information on the 'Localising Philosophy' project, see the podcast at Findlay and Smith 2019.

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